ROBERT HUNTER

POVERTY

Edited by Peter d' A. Jones

Social Conscience in the Progressive Era

HARPER TORCHBOOKS TB 3065 / $2.75

POVERTY

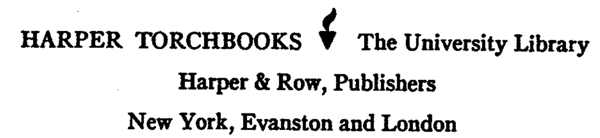
Social Conscience in the Progressive Era

BY

ROBERT HUNTER

Edited by

PETER d'A. JONES


HARPER TORCHBOOKS The University Library

Harper & Row, Publishers

New York, Evanston and London

POVERTY

Introduction and Notes to the Torchbook
edition copyright © 1965 by Peter d'A. Jones

Printed in the United States of America.

This book was originally published in 1904 by
The Macmillan Company.

First HARPER TORCHBOOK edition published 1965 by
Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated
49 East 33rd Street
New York, N.Y. 10016.

CHAPTER IV

THE SICK

ONLY in times of severe epidemics, when nearly all lives are threatened, do we realize the meaning of sickness. At such times our conception of sickness becomes a social one. We are forced to rise above ourselves and to give our hearts and minds to the sorrow of others, — the thousands, outside of our own family, or circle of friends, who are in distress of mind and in agony of body. In ordinary times sickness is an individual thing related to some one whom we know and love. The sick no longer gather together in public places as they did at the pool of Bethesda. The "great multitude of impotent folk, the blind, halt, withered," are still amongst us, but they are in their homes and in the hospitals, and no longer awaken public compassion by an assembled presence. Occasionally, as for instance when the great Austrian surgeon came to America, they come into public view again. It was thought that one hundred crippled children would seek relief. Two thousand made application, and over eight thousand were

brought to light in one city.[1] For the time we forgot individual sickness, and eight thousand homes, each with its crippled child, passed before our eyes.

But sickness is so multiform that only an incomplete and partial conception of what it means in any great city is possible. It is so terrible in its worst forms that the mere mention of the names by which these more distressing diseases are known is abhorrent. The ills which deform, wither, and disfigure the human form, which paralyze and cripple the body, which consume with internal fires helpless children and strongest men, are painful even to contemplate. It is more than enough to know in one's own family the dreadful suffering which attends disease, without making the additional effort to conceive sickness *en masse*. But the sickness of one's self or of one's family is only as a wave in an ocean of waves. The long, weary night of anxiety and care is the night of many, many thousand troubled hearts. To-night—half a million people in this great city are either themselves sick or are anxious in mind about some dear one who is sick.[2] Many are to watch and care the whole night through. Nearly two hundred of the sick are to die before another nightfall. Twenty or thirty thousand are to linger on, to grow weaker and weaker, coughing and choking, night after night,

until breath refuses to come. In the great houses of pain, with doctors and nurses and long rows of white beds filled with bandaged bodies and writhing forms, eighty thousand sick souls will pray for relief before the year is gone. Nearly a million more will pass through the doors of the dispensaries to have pains allayed and bodies healed.

The homes also have their burdens of the sick. All together in New York City — in the mansions, tenements, and hovels there are constantly a quarter of a million who are sick, and two-thirds that number are absolutely disabled.* In the home of the rich a child lies burning up with fever. All are watchful and awake the whole night through. Doctors, nurses, servants, with a thousand appliances, make every effort to ease and comfort that little life. In the big tenement a light burns all night, and a tired workman watches every movement and listens for every breath of his hot, restless little one. At dawn he goes to his work. He kisses the feverish lips. It may be for the last time, — he knows not; and all day long his heart is heavy and anxious. In the filthy hovel, a drunken woman becomes sober, and her flushed face white — when the doctor shakes his head over the starved baby in the bundle

* William Farr estimates that to one annual death two persons are on the average constantly suffering from severe sickness and three persons are ill enough to require some medical relief. "Vital Statistics," pp. 512–513.

of rags. These are but three homes — imagine a quarter of a million. This sickness, which, as Emerson says, "eats up all the life and youth it can lay hold of," comes with its message of pain and destruction to every home, and for every one visit to the mansion it comes twice to the tenement and thrice to the hovel.

Source as it is of so much pain and of so much else that racks the poor old body of humanity, sickness forces upon thousands and thousands of struggling families an almost greater misery — poverty. But poverty is both a cause and a result of sickness. No one knows how many thousand families of workingmen, through this cause alone, are brought to distressing poverty and even to miserable pauperism. The charitable organizations say that about one-fourth of the distress which manifests itself is caused by sickness.[1] It is a fertile and lively cause of poverty, constantly active and supremely powerful. When it afflicts a wage-earner, it stops earnings, and lays at the same time heavier burdens of expense upon the home. How often one hears a workman say, "I am all right so long as I keep well and have work." A man may be a drunkard and yet able to earn something; but unemployment and disabling sickness may shatter every assurance the workman has of food and shelter for himself and family, and for these things he may be in no wise responsible. Upon

the chance of the bread-winner's remaining well and having work depends the livelihood of several million people in this country. The insecurity, the chance, the day by day uncertainty of livelihood among the wage-earning classes encourage many workingmen, half truthfully and half cynically, to call themselves wage-slaves *whose owners have been freed* from caring for them when sick or unemployed. At any rate, the workman, even when sick or unemployed, must now care for himself and family. The insecurity of livelihood caused by sickness increases with the increase of poverty. The highest classes of workmen have less sickness than the next highest, and so on down to the poorest, among whom sickness, in one form or another, is almost universal. Among 10,000,000 well-to-do persons the number of yearly deaths is probably not more than 100,000; among the highest class of wage-earners the number is probably not less than 150,000; and among the poorest, or those in poverty, the number is probably not less than 350,000.[1] These are rough estimates for the purpose of indicating how widespread sickness is among those in poverty, what heavy burdens it lays upon those who can least afford to bear them, and how much of the sickness of the poor is excessive and unnecessary. Poverty and sickness form a vicious partnership, each helping the other to add to the miseries of the most unfortunate of mankind.

This close relationship between poverty and sickness helps to make sickness in the tenements a misery which the more fortunate cannot understand. The sorrow which accompanies disease and death is a sorrow which almost any human being can understand. Both of these ills of mankind all men must some time suffer. The rich may escape some of the miseries which accompany all sickness in the tenements, but the sorrow and the pain all men must some time know. The well-to-do may have the best medical attention and nurses; they may be free from crowding and from hunger; they may escape from irritation and noises and street disturbances; they may cease work and need not return to it until they are quite well; they may have a change of climate and all other things that money can buy, and these things are much, but they can neither escape illness nor avoid death. The poor of the tenements must be sick oftener; they must die earlier; more of them must die in youth and in their prime. To the poor sickness means more than illness. It means misery of the severest kind. From those who have already sacrificed too much, new sacrifices are demanded. I have known mothers working in the sweatshops who have been "on their feet" for over one hundred hours, watching over the sick-bed, sewing and watching, sewing and watching. I have been through the tenements in the "dog days" of summer when the "infant

torches" go out. "Be quiet," a woman said to me one day, as she tiptoed along a tenement hall; "there is a sick child in there; I think it's dying." All people are not thoughtless of others in the tenements; but in the days of summer, when the windows are open, no amount of consideration and thoughtfulness can prevent annoyances. The crowd on the streets, the yelling, the shouting of pedlers, the continuous hum, the odors, the lack of conveniences, the noise and the bang, the flies, the heat, and the overcrowded rooms, make sickness in the tenements a hellish thing.

One day I visited the family of a man who had been prostrated by heat while at work with a street-paving gang. They were a family of seven, living in a two-room apartment of a rear tenement. The day was in August, and the sun beat down unintermittently and without mercy. The husband had been brought home a few hours before. The wife, in a distracted but skilful way, found pathways among the clamoring children. The air was steamy with a half-finished washing, and remnants of the last meal were still upon the table. A crying baby and the sick husband occupied the only bed. I had known before of five people sleeping in one bed; but I learned here that the father and oldest child usually slept on the floor. As I watched the woman on that day I understood a little of what it meant to

live in such contracted quarters. To cook and wash for seven, to nurse a crying baby broken out with heat, and to care for a delirious husband, to arrange a possible sleeping-place for seven, — to do all these things in two rooms which open upon an alley tremulous with heated odors and swarming with flies from the garbage and manure boxes, was something to tax the patience and strength of a Titan.[1]

In this instance the man had broken down, and sickness is most serious when it attacks the bread-winner of a working-class family. The sickness of wife or child is far less terrifying. However painful the disease or distressing the consequences, the family's peace of mind is not shattered by the fear and dread of want. The man is not kept from his work, and his earnings, made more necessary by the sickness, may still supply the family's needs. The diseases which kill or undermine the health of the adults, especially the men, are the ones which strike terror to the heart of working-class families. Those which almost invariably cause death, — such as cancer, phthisis, Bright's disease, diabetes, — as well as those which permanently incapacitate a workman, — such as apoplexy, paralysis, etc., — the many accidents in industry, which cripple the body, and the diseases, arising from certain dangerous trades, which permanently undermine the health, are the forms of sickness which generally mean for

wage-earning families poverty and often pauperism. Such diseases affect the welfare of the whole family. They stop all earnings unless the wife is able, or one of the children old enough, to become a wage-earner. Sickness assumes a new and more terrible meaning when one realizes that the mass of wage-earning families are pathetically dependent upon some one person's health. Any one familiar with the poor knows with what grim determination half-sick workmen labor under this heavy responsibility. An Italian workman dying of consumption once said to a friend of mine, who was urging him as a last hope to quit work and go to a sanatorium, "No! No! Me die not yet at all! Me gotta bringa de grub to ma chil'."

Wives suffer from the ordinary forms of sickness which afflict men, and, in addition, have to go through the serious trial, periodically occurring, of childbirth. The unnatural disease, puerperal fever, so often due to lack of care, insanitary conditions, and overcrowding, is perhaps the greatest ill which the women in poverty have to suffer. The quack doctors and the untrained midwives, in the poorer districts, even more than the conditions of poverty, make this disease an ever menacing misery. The most terrible neglect is frequently observed during such critical periods. I have often tried to forget the story of one case of illness and death which came under my observation

several years ago. The little girl and a "neighbor-woman" told it to me when they came to apply for enough money to bury the mother and the baby child. The mother, a recent widow, had finished a hard day of labor; she came home tired and ill. The little girl, used, even at her early age, to household cares, prepared the supper for herself and mother. During the night a baby child arrived. The little girl helped her mother as best she could, but hers was not the skill required. The mother and baby died. During the previous week they had been evicted from their former house, and the little girl knew no one in the new neighborhood. In fear and despair, she locked the door and sat with the dead mother and sister all that day. Again and again she kissed the mother's face, but, as the child told me, "she would not wake up." On the following day she went out, locked the door, and walked several miles to their former house and found there the neighbor-woman who brought the child to me. When we talked of burying the mother, the miserable little girl, who had, up to that time, seemed almost heartless, broke into sobs. For a long time she refused to give up the key to the rooms, and all the time she besought us not to take her mother away. It would not be possible to describe the misery and wretchedness which I have seen in the homes of the poor, and none is more painful to remember than the sickness of women.

And yet whatever the ills of mankind, they seem to weigh heaviest upon the children. The enormous number of deaths in certain parts of our largest cities has been referred to as the "Massacre of the Innocents." In certain rear tenements, in dark rooms and in the most insanitary portions of the "double-decker" tenements, and especially in certain insanitary and pestilential blocks, the death rate of children under five years of age is a matter of public disgrace. The death rate of children under five years in those places where there were both front and rear tenements, ran up as high as 204 per thousand. In other words, four or five times as many babies die in these houses as in the houses of the well-to-do districts. If this same rate were maintained among all the poor (which is not probable), of 1,000,000 babies under five years, 200,000 would die annually; while of 1,000,000 babies in well-to-do districts only 50,000 would die.[1] The Tenement House Committee of 1894 called these rear tenements "veritable slaughter-houses."

Excessive death rates among children, as among men and women, are, of course, largely unnecessary and preventable. William Farr said many years ago, "When any city experiences a higher rate than the average, it should always be a matter of serious inquiry and concern to its citizens."[2] The same may be said of any one section of a city as

compared with other sections of the same city. It is said that the number of unnecessary deaths in London is as great each year as the total number of deaths in the English army during the three years of the Boer War.[1] The reduction in the year 1903 of the death rate in New York from 20 per thousand to 18.75 per thousand meant the saving of 4500 lives and the prevention of about 10,000 cases of severe illness. It saved the work of one or two great hospitals; it saved some wives from being widows and some children from being fatherless, and it also saved some from poverty. This is the work of prevention. We shall never know whose lives were saved, but that 4500 lives were saved — that we know. The same saving can be made again and again. This year, if perfect sanitary measures could be put into effect, probably 20,000 or 25,000 lives could be saved in New York City alone, and 40,000 or 50,000 cases of severe illness prevented. Many of the men, women, and children who are sick and who die unnecessarily, live in insanitary homes, and some of them work in insanitary mills, mines, offices, and factories, and the work of prevention lies in enforcing, in so far as is possible, a collective standard of cleanliness and sanitation upon every home and workshop.

So far as preventive measures are concerned, the greatest improvements of recent years have been those health measures compelling sanitary condi-

tions in homes; and these improvements strike at the root of many of the foregoing evils. It would not be possible, in limited space, to go into details concerning either the bad conditions which still exist, or the many wise and humane measures which have been undertaken, in many of our cities, to stamp out the worst evils in tenements and workshops. A few years ago there existed a frightful death rate among the people of a certain section of Glasgow. The municipal authorities, after becoming acquainted with the conditions, demolished the houses in that section and built new tenements to take their places. By this act the death rate was reduced from 55 per thousand to a little over 14 per thousand. An adjoining slum still had a death rate of 53 per thousand. Here were two groups of houses, sheltering practically the same classes of people, one with a death rate of a little over 14 per thousand, the other with a death rate nearly four times as great.[1] The discovery of similar conditions in all great cities, both in this country and abroad, has given a new impulse to the development of sanitary measures, in some cases involving the expenditure of millions of dollars.

We are still very much behind European countries both in our knowledge of the facts and in our remedial measures. Our housing question has

never been carefully studied in its relation to the death rate or in its relation to sickness and to various forms of debility and exhaustion. The Tenement House Committee of 1894 made an effort to get at the facts, and Dr. Roger S. Tracy's work was and still is of value; but the last Tenement House Commission of New York almost ignored the subject. Even a study of the death rates was not made, because of the difficulties involved.[1] For this reason we cannot marshal the same array of facts in support of housing reform which give terrible force to the arguments of German, French, and English advocates of improved housing. It is also for this reason that we must use English data to indicate some of the worst evils of insanitary housing. There is, however, every reason to suppose that we should arrive at the same conclusions if a careful study of American conditions were made.

The evils of overcrowding are perhaps the most important. The Royal Commission of 1884 gathered a great amount of facts and took extensive testimony on this subject. The general summary showed that pauperism, immorality, perverted sexuality, drunkenness, and many other forms of debauchery were caused in some instances, in others abetted, by the indecent overcrowding which existed. The testimony further showed most distressing physi-

cal results due to overcrowding. High death rates; a pitiful increase in infant mortality; terrible suffering among little children; scrofula and congenital diseases; ophthalmia, due to dark, ill-ventilated, overcrowded rooms; sheer exhaustion and inability to work; encouragement of infectious diseases; a reduced physical stamina, causing consumption and diseases arising from general debility, were some of the evils of overcrowding.[1] Similar, but less definite, conclusions regarding the evils of overcrowding were arrived at by the New York Tenement House Committee of 1894. The secretary, in his report, says that overcrowding has evil effects of various kinds, for example: "Keeping children up and out of doors until midnight in warm weather, because rooms are almost unendurable; making cleanliness of house and street difficult; filling the air with unwholesome emanations and foul odors of every kind; producing a state of nervous tension; interfering with the separateness and sacredness of home life; leading to a promiscuous mixing of all ages and sexes in a single room — thus breaking down the barriers of modesty and conducing to the corruption of the young, and occasionally to revolting crimes."[2] The conclusions drawn by both commissions concerning the physical, the mental, and the moral degeneration which results from overcrowding, constitute a most seri-

ous indictment of the living conditions in which hundreds of thousands of working people live both in this country and abroad. Even if one ignored the cost to the community of disease and vice, the heavy burdens which these conditions force upon the individual families of the working people show the vital necessity of those preventive measures which society alone has the power to initiate.

Probably no other city in the world has so many dark rooms and other insanitary conditions, which act as exciting causes for the spread of tuberculosis and similar diseases, resulting from broken vitality, as New York City. Light and sanitary homes are probably more necessary to our working people than to those of any other city or country. Recreation and recuperation are vital necessities to the man whose work is hard, intense, and spurred on by the feverish competitive spirit of American life. It is needless to point out that the particular insanitary conditions which prevail in the New York tenements are in many cases the very ones which most effectually deny this needed recuperation.* It would be of great value to know to what extent the working classes suffer from debility and exhaustion due to these conditions of work and living. In addition to knowing more of the ordinary diseases resulting from occupations, contagions, and other causes of serious

* See Appendix A.

illness, it would be well to know to what extent overcrowded and badly ventilated homes are responsible for broken vitality, debility, and exhaustion. Some light has been thrown on this matter by inquiries in England. The Earl of Shaftesbury said before the Royal Commission on Housing: "When we were at The Board of Health some years ago we instituted inquiries in these low and miserable neighborhoods to see what was the amount of labor lost in the year, not by illness, but by sheer exhaustion and inability to do the work. We found upon the lowest average that every workman or workwoman lost about twenty days in the year from sheer exhaustion" . . . and the wage thus lost "would go a great way toward paying an increased rent for a better house."[1] That deterioration in health which often does not figure in the death rates is one of the most serious and least observed of the evil results of bad housing.

While New York's conditions are worse than those of any other American city, the remedial efforts here have been the broadest and best. In many other cities also an awakening has taken place which promises to advance housing reform. However partial and ineffectual our efforts have been up to the present, we can look forward to a slow improvement in the living conditions of the people. But any advance in sanitary living conditions is, at best, but

a partial advance. Improvement of conditions in which the people work should go hand in hand with the improvement of living conditions. In this field we have done almost nothing. There is no other nation, comparable industrially to the United States, which is so backward as this country in its knowledge, in its legislation, in its administrative machinery for dealing with the insanitary conditions in factories, mines, and workshops, and in preventing or regulating those dangerous processes in industry which are responsible for a very large number of unnecessary diseases, accidents, and deaths. We have been limiting the power for harm which may be exercised by the individual landlord; but no other country has so much as our own permitted individuals to disregard, to a criminal extent, the health and welfare of employees. I dare say no other nation has so many needless deaths or so many cases of illness wholly due to preventable industrial causes as the United States of America. It is perhaps needless to repeat that these insanitary conditions of home and factory have a mighty bearing on the extent of poverty. The field is one which offers the greatest opportunity for humane and merciful legislation. The workmen who are crushed, crippled, or killed, who contract incurable diseases, who are poisoned, or who are incapacitated by carelessness, insanitary conditions, or dangerous machinery, are so numerous in this day that in a very few

recognized as "marks of trade." Typesetters, telegraphers, tailors, writers, etc., suffer frequently from muscular cramps and similar afflictions. Such breakdowns may at first prevent only a free muscular action, but they are likely in the end to result in palsy and paralysis of the over-used muscles. The latter, for instance, happens very frequently to sewing-machine operatives. Shop girls are likely to suffer, as a result of their occupation, from a narrow, contracted pelvis. Varicose veins and ulcers result from continuous standing. Curvature of the spine results almost inevitably from certain employments. These are but a few among many of the physical ills which result from certain specialized occupations.

Even these comparatively slight afflictions are serious to the workman, because he must work or become a pauper. The more terrible and loathsome diseases of occupations, which utterly destroy the workman's health or which cause death, are too many to mention in detail. Those diseases which result from handling or coming in contact with the poisonous materials used in the chemical industries are the ones most generally known. Lead is a commonly used poison. A very large number of workmen are employed in many different industries where they are subjected to the dangers of lead poisoning. The early symptoms of the disease are blue gums,

followed by a loosening and coming out of the teeth; but blindness, paralysis, and death in convulsions finally result.[1] Miscarriages, still-births, and convulsions occur frequently to women lead-workers who are with child. This is one of the worst of the so-called poisonous trades. The dust-producing trades cause various respiratory diseases, such as miners' asthma, and consumption. Mining, street-sweeping, and file-grinding are the ones most generally known. Bakers, laundresses, tailors, and dressmakers are also subject to certain diseases, resulting from their work and from insanitary conditions, which cause repeated breakdowns and a high death rate. The dangers of work on the railroads have been spoken of elsewhere.

These problems of unnecessary and preventable sickness, whether of home or of factory, cannot be solved by the individual. The individual who suffers is in the main powerless to alter conditions. On the other hand, the landlord and the manufacturer not only do not, as a rule, voluntarily improve the conditions, but they are at times even active in preventing humane legislation for bettering sanitary conditions. Dr. J. T. Arlidge, a great specialist on diseases of occupations, says: "When visiting manufactories, the visitor is almost invariably informed that the particular manufacture therein pursued is a very healthy one. Even in cases where the con-

trary is a matter of general knowledge, and demonstrated by statistics, it is no uncommon thing to find the matter treated as of very little moment. If undeniable, the evils are minimized, and the masters and managers are prone to close their eyes to conditions of labor that loudly call for a remedy, and cast the blame more or less upon the workpeople."[1] Again and again in England and Germany, where many studies of injurious employments have been made, the employing class casts all the blame for high death rates and excessive disease upon the workers, and the landlord class does likewise when opposing sanitary measures for the improvement of tenement-houses. Even in those industries where the workers are degenerating and would become extinct, were it not for new recruits, the employers manifest the same unconcern for their health and accept with great unwillingness any proposed sanitary improvements. So far is the greed for profits carried. The deterioration of an entire people may result if this greed be not restrained.* From these facts alone it is fair to assume that, if the sanitary evils of home and factory are to be stamped out, it must not rest with the employers or landlords: it must be done by the community itself.

Any one will realize how fragmentary and incomplete this brief survey is of preventable disease

* See Appendix B, p. 347.

and of preventive measures. We have hardly made a beginning in certain of the fields which have been mentioned. Within the last few years, however, a movement has developed which promises to arouse our people to the wisdom of preventive measures. Within the last decade there have been a multitude of societies formed for the purpose of stamping out the most serious disease which afflicts mankind. Tuberculosis is the great modern plague, more subtle and less generally feared, but far more deadly, than any other plague the world has known.

There was once a Great Black Plague. It was the consternation of the people of the time when it grew and flourished. Those who were able to do so fled from the cities which it ravaged. It lived a year and caused the death of two or three million people. It was probably the result of filthy, undrained streets and vile tenements. "The Great White Plague" has lived for centuries and centuries; it was known before the time of Christ. It has caused the death of millions and millions of people; it will this year cause the death of over one million more. One hundred and fifty thousand people in the United States alone will this year die of the disease. Within the next twelve months not less than fifteen thousand of the people of New York City, some of whom will be our neighbors,

friends, and even perhaps our relatives, will bow down before the Great White Plague. It is a needless plague, a preventable plague. It is one of the results of our inhumane tenements; it follows in the train of our inhumane sweatshops; it fastens itself upon children and young people because we forget that they need playgrounds and because we are selfish and niggardly in providing breathing spaces; it comes where the hours of labor are long and the wages small; it afflicts the children who are sent to labor when they should yet be in school; the plague goes to meet them. It is a brother to the anguish of poverty, and wherever food is scant and bodies half clothed and rooms dark, this hard and relentless brother of poverty finds a victim. It is more kind to the old, who have every reason for dying, than it is to the young, who have no reason for dying. It takes, as it were, an especial delight in mowing down the bread-winners of wage-earning families at the sweetest and most treasured period of their lives, — at the time when they are having the first joys of married life and bringing into the world their little ones. More than one-third of all deaths that occur between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five are due to the Great White Plague. It is a waste of youth prepared for life and labor, cut off by needless death as life and labor begin. For it is

a wholly needless and preventable cause of death and of inestimable mourning and anguish among the widows and the fatherless.

The extent of the White Plague is one of the best tests of a high or low state of society; in many ways it is the truest and most accurate of social tests. The number of its victims will indicate the districts in which sweatshops flourish, and the streets in which the double-decker tenement, the scourge of New York, is most often found. Where the death rate from the Plague is greatest there ignorance prevails; drunkenness is rife; poverty, hunger, and cold are the common misfortune.

A prominent physician said a few years ago: "This is a disease which has claimed more victims than all the wars and all the plagues and scourges of the human race. Even in the few short years since Koch's discovery over two million persons on this continent have succumbed to its fatal infection. . . . The annual tribute of the United States to this scourge is over one hundred thousand of its inhabitants. Each year the world yields up one million ninety-five thousand, each day three thousand, each minute two of its people, as a sacrifice to this plague. Of the seventy million individuals now peopling these United States, ten millions must inevitably die of this disease if the present ratio is kept up." [1]

Brandt of the New York Committee for the Prevention of Tuberculosis is authority for the statement that one house in Chinatown has a record of thirty-seven cases in nine years; another house has a record of twenty-five, and still another of nineteen.[1] A house in the Syrian quarter has had thirteen deaths from tuberculosis.[2] In the "Lung Block" there have been two hundred and sixty-five cases of tuberculosis reported to the Board of Health in nine years. Mr. Ernest Poole, who knows the conditions in this block also, says that this is probably not more than half the actual number. In other words, there have probably been over five hundred cases of tuberculosis in this one block during the last nine years. The disease is one which affects especially residents of the tenements and the workers in certain trades, as, for instance, printers, tailors, bookkeepers, dressmakers, bakers, cigar-makers, potters, stone-cutters, file-grinders, dyers, wool-carders, etc.[3]

To know why these classes of people are affected, let us for a moment consider how the disease is spread. A person having consumption can, it is said, expectorate in a day seven billions of germs or bacilli. These germs or bacilli are the only cause of the disease. The sputa or expectorations from the diseased lungs dry and afterward become a pulverized dust which is blown about through tenements, theatres, street cars, railway trains, offices, and factories. In

fact, the infection is disseminated wherever tuberculous sputum becomes dry and pulverized. The germ is killed by sunlight and lives but a short time in the open air, but it will live for months in darkness or in places artificially lighted. Every consumptive, therefore, who is careless about his sputa — and most consumptives are careless who have not been trained to discretion by having lived for some time in a sanatorium — becomes, in consequence, a centre of infection. Those about him are very likely to contract the disease; those living in the same rooms or working in the same factory or office, are the ones most liable to the infection, especially when they are delicate, overworked, underfed, or underclad.

Dr. Hermann Biggs, the General Medical Officer of the Board of Health, says that there are thirty thousand persons in New York City suffering from tuberculosis.[1] There are therefore about thirty thousand centres in the city disseminating the infection. Where conditions are favorable, as, for instance, in certain offices, factories, sweatshops, and tenements, the disease is constantly spreading. As a result, there are "Lung Blocks," and, doubtless, if it were known, "lung factories" and "lung sweatshops" also. This dry, pulverized dust is the most important of the means of spreading tuberculosis throughout all parts of the city, so that, I do not doubt, a consumptive of the sweatshop, spraying the garments he sews by sneez-

ing or coughing, may convey to some delicate lad or girl in a far-distant part of the country or in a wealthy part of the city the disease which the sweatshop has given him. A virulent cause of consumption is the spray discharged from the nose, lungs, or mouth of the consumptive invalid. As before mentioned, those near the person suffering from tuberculosis are very likely to contract the disease. Children playing about on the floor, kissing or embracing the diseased mother or father, taking the milk from a tuberculous mother, so often contract the disease that the mass of people have an almost unshakable belief that it is inherited. Eminent physicians, however, say that the disease is not inherited. Professor Koch, who twenty-two years ago discovered the cause of tuberculosis and thus opened the way for saving millions of lives, says in an instructive interview on the subject: "The last three or four weeks of life are the most deadly in the spread of infection. . . . His every cough, sneeze, or effort at speech sends forth a spray laden with bacilli in virulent form deadly to the poor wife and children around him. . . ." He speaks further of the dying consumptive who sets "this terrible spray in operation." In another place he says, "it is not cruelty to isolate these cases; it is the truest and highest kindness. . . .

"In all other infectious diseases we attack infection at its source; cases of small-pox, of leprosy, of diph-

theria, of plague, are isolated, but cases of tuberculosis in their last stages, the most deadly stage of the most deadly disease of all, are still allowed throughout Europe to spread further infection broadcast in the midst of their already destitute families. This fact does not yet seem to be learned. When it is, and when we have these homes for the hopeless cases adjoining every city, then tuberculosis will pass from the midst of us." [1]

Let us consider whether it is an economy on the part of society to ignore the spread of tuberculosis and to do little more than to furnish the consumptive with a place in which to die. The state has gone little farther than that in this country. We need not, for the moment, consider what is kind, what is humane, what would be doing unto others as we would have others do unto us if we had consumption. We need only consider cold figures and the economics of the disease. Dr. Hermann Biggs, who has spent a good part of his life in doing invaluable work for New York and is one of the few physicians of this country who have carefully studied the social consequences of individual diseases, has recently said in an important lecture on tuberculosis that the average cost to society of preparing a man for usefulness is $1500. This is in the nature of a grant from parents or state, which the child, when he becomes a man, is expected to return to the community by his labor.

Considering that 10,000 people every year die of tuberculosis in New York, the natural conclusion is that New York loses annually about $15,000,000. The cost of their nursing, food, medicines, attendance, as well as the loss of productive labor, adds a further loss to the municipality which Dr. Biggs estimates at $8,000,000. Upon the same basis it is estimated that the annual loss in the United States from tuberculosis alone is $330,000,000.[1] It should be noted that this is an annual loss. Each consumptive uncared for infects some one near him; he passes his disease on to others; he leaves a legacy of death to friends and neighbors. The 120,000 consumptives who die this year yield 120,000 consumptives who are to die next year, and so on continuously. It is cheaper in every way to cure a consumptive in a sanatorium than it is to let him die in a hospital or in a public institution of some kind, but to let him die in a hospital or institution of whatever kind is cheaper than to let him die in his tenement. What we are doing now is just the wrong thing. As Dr. J. H. Pryor has said, "We must care for the consumptive in the right place, in the right way, and at the right time, until he is cured; instead of, as now, in the wrong place, in the wrong way, at the wrong time, until he is dead." It is cheaper and it is infinitely more humane.

It is unquestionably the duty of society to care for

the victims of this disease. It is a social disease. Society is responsible for its continuance. If I contract the disease when in a theatre, a factory, or a public building or when riding in a street car, or if I move into a tenement which has just been vacated by a consumptive, or if I live in a tenement where a consumptive was permitted to spit on the floors in the hall, or if I am compelled by poverty to live in a dark, unventilated room, which the law should everywhere prohibit, I know that society is to blame for my having contracted the disease, because society alone through its board of health and governmental agencies, can prohibit careless expectoration, can disinfect tenements, can compel notification of diseases, can confiscate sweatshop garments. It alone can remove centres of infection by powers which it alone has.

Many years ago I was engaged in taking into the country a great many small children from one of the poorest districts of one of our largest cities. The little ones were gay and active and could hardly be kept quiet or in hand during the journey. One little girl, in a condition of extreme anæmia, with bright eyes and a very delicate little frame, found herself so easily exhausted in play that she came to sit by me and talk. I discovered from my short conversation with her that her father had been ill for several months, that he "coughed and coughed"

and lay in bed most of the day. She and another little one slept with the father; the mother and two babies slept in another bed in the same room. The mother earned the living, and in the evening when she came home, the little girl said, "she would just weep and weep." Upon my return I called upon the father and told him how he was endangering the lives of the children by remaining at home, and especially by his extreme carelessness in spitting about the room. I urged him to go to a hospital, but he refused, saying that, as he had to die, he was going to die with his family. The rooms were cold and dark and bare, and I knew what the result would be if he were left to continue at home. Failing in all efforts to persuade him, I urged the Board of Health to compel him; but the Health Board responded by saying that, according to the law, tuberculosis was not an infectious disease and that therefore the man could not be forcibly removed. I remember with what despair I worked for two or three weeks in trying to persuade him to be just and fair to his family. Finally I left the city and was gone for somewhat over two years and a half. Upon my return, I inquired concerning the family from a charity agent who had visited them frequently. She said they were no longer dependent upon charity: they were all dead. One seldom sees a more perfect, nor indeed a more terrible, example of the helplessness of the

individual, and of the need of social action, to stop the spread of the disease.

The following measures, if carried out in every part of this country, would stamp out the Plague in twenty years.* First, the disease should be declared in all states and in all cities "infectious." Second, there should be compulsory notification of all cases of tuberculosis. The necessity for this need not be argued. The reasons for it have been fully presented by Dr. Biggs and others, and a form of it is in operation in New York City, in Prussia, and in Norway.[1] Third, the advanced cases should be given care in institutions suited to their need. Professor Koch says: "Let their days be made as pleasant as ingenuity can make them; let them in some airy ward, or in an open *Liegehalle*, receive visits from their friends, even in these last days; but let them go to the grave with the consolation of knowing that they are not handing on a legacy of tragedy to those they leave behind."[2] Fourth, the establishment and maintenance of sufficient sanatoria and dispensaries for the treatment in the earlier stages of every case of consumption. Fifth, careful and complete disinfection of all houses and rooms in which consumptives have died and from which consumptives have been removed, etc., etc.

* Professor Koch says that he sees "no reason why" in England and in Germany tuberculosis should not be banished "from our midst in, say, ten years . . . without any exorbitant outlay on the part of either State."

Sixth, the construction of decent tenements, and the destruction, or satisfactory renovation, of every house known to be a source of infection, the demolition of "Lung Blocks," and the establishment of breathing spaces in the poorer districts of the cities. Seventh, a crusade of hygienic education among all people and the punishment of promiscuous spitting.

"The Great White Plague" is the result of our weakness, our ignorance, our selfishness, and our vices; there is no more need of its existence on the earth than of the existence of the Great Black Plague, the plague of typhus fever, the plague of dysentery, the plague of Asiatic cholera, the plague of leprosy, or the plague of small-pox. These other plagues have been driven from the western world, and so, too, will the Great White Plague have been, when the crusade against tuberculosis shall have enlisted a larger army of competent physicians, and of other public-spirited citizens who will give generously of their time and wealth to the prevention of this disease; or when, as in Germany, the state itself and the municipalities in the state provide the needed sanatoria for the care of its victims. It will be stamped out when the humane work of the Tenement House Department and the Health Department of this city, and of every other city, is victorious over opponents; when there is established in the mind of every one that vital principle of an advanced civilization, namely, that the profits of

individuals are second in importance to the life, welfare, and prosperity of the great masses of people. It will disappear from that community which demands the destruction of an insanitary tenement regardless of inconvenience to individuals and which also demands that there shall be no dark and windowless rooms within its boundaries under any condition whatsoever, as a result of any plea, or as a favor to private interests great or small.

Tuberculosis has continued so long in the world because the individual man, and communities made up of men, thinking individually, cannot in their hearts appreciate the wickedness and the sorrow which are both cause and result of the White Plague. Ruskin truly says: "People would instantly care for others as well as themselves if only they could imagine others as well as themselves. Let a child fall into the river before the roughest man's eyes; he will usually do what he can to get it out, even at some risk to himself; and all the town will triumph in the saving of one little life. Let the same man be shown that hundreds of children are dying of fever for want of some sanitary measure which will cost him trouble to urge, and he will make no effort; and probably all the town would resist if he did." When we are told the following story by one who has worked among the consumptives of our largest city, and who knows that it is typical of hundreds

and thousands of wretched, poverty-stricken people, have we no incentive to do all that we can, individually and in association with others, to stamp out so devastating an affliction as that of the needless and preventable Great White Plague?

"The Prayer of the Tenement[1]

"'Breath — breath — give me breath.' A Yiddish whisper, on a night in April, 1903, from the heart of the New York Ghetto.

"At 18 Clinton Street, back in the rear tenement, a young Roumanian Jew lay dying of consumption. I had come in with a Jewish doctor. With every breath I felt the heavy, foul odor from poverty, ignorance, filth, disease. In this room ten feet square six people lay on the floor packed close, rubbing the heavy sleep from tired eyes, and staring at us dumbly. Two small windows gave them air, from a noisome court — a pit twenty feet across and five floors deep. The other room was only a closet six feet by seven, with a grated window high up opening on an air-shaft eighteen inches wide. And in that closet four more were sleeping, three on a bed, one in a cradle.

"'Breath — breath — give me breath.' The man's disease was infectious; and yet for two long weeks he had lain here dying. From his soiled bed he could touch the one table where the two families ate; the cooking stove was but six feet from him; the cupboard, over his pillow; he could even reach one of the cradles, where his baby girl lay staring frightened at his strange position. For his wasted body was too feeble to rise; too choked, too tortured, to lie down. His young wife held him up while the sleepers stared silently on, and that Yiddish whisper came over and over again, but now with a new and more fearful meaning. 'Breath — breath — breath. Or kill me; oh, kill me!'

"Two years ago this man had come to America — one of the four hundred and eighty-eight thousand in 1901. He came young and well and hopeful, with his wife and their baby son. Two more had been born since then. It was to be a new country, a new home, a fresh start, a land to breathe in. 'Breath — breath — give me breath.' He had breathed no air here but the close, heavy air of the sweatshop from six in the morning until ten at night. Sometimes — he whispered — he worked on until eleven. He was not alone. In New York to-day and to-night are over fifty thousand like him working. And late in the night when he left the feverish labor, at the hour when other homes are sleeping, he had come in through the foul court and had sunk into restless sleep in the dark closet six feet by seven. There are three hundred and sixty-one thousand such closets in the city. And this was his home.

"'Luft — giebt mir luft.' He spoke only Yiddish. The new country had given the Plague before the language. For the sweatshop and the closet had made him weak; his weakened body could make no fight; the Plague came in and fed swiftly. Still on through the winter he had worked over the machine in the sweatshop, infecting the garments he sewed — feverish, tired, fearful — to buy food and coal, to keep his 'home' alive. And now, on this last day of life, ten times he had whispered to his brother, begging him to care for the wife and the three little children.

"The struggle now is ended. The home is scattered. The smothered whisper is forever hushed. 'Breath — breath — give me breath.' It speaks the appeal of thousands."

Unquestionably the responsibility, whether for the sanitary conditions of the tenements, the sanitary conditions of the workshops, or for the rendering of industrial processes less dangerous, is definitely a social one. The individual alone is powerless. Fevers and plagues will continue to afflict mankind until the community itself is aroused to demand wise and humane legislation, providing for the most thorough preventive measures. The individual cannot make laws for the community; he is very greatly dependent upon the common water supply; he is dependent upon the action of the

community to insure to him and to others pure air, an abundance of light, cleanliness of streets and surroundings, the provision of good sewerage and efficient plumbing. Society must protect him from poisonous vapors and odors, arising from decomposing animal and vegetable matter and from offensive trades, such as slaughtering, etc.; he must depend upon the sanitary authorities to prevent adulteration and to guarantee to him and to others pure food. The sanitary authorities alone can prevent dangers to health from those insanitary conditions arising as a result of street excavations, privies, stables, accumulated garbage and dead animals. The community alone has the power to compel an individual to keep the tenement he owns in a wholesome and sanitary condition; it alone can legislate and it alone can enforce sanitary conditions in mines, workshops, and factories. The individual of the present day is dependent upon society for all of these preventive, sanitary measures. Whatever may be the weaknesses in socialism as applied to industry, socialism is now demanded by every one to protect the health of the community and to make wise and far-reaching provisions for the physical welfare of all the people.

There is now a pretty general realization of the necessity for social action to stamp out disease whenever it is epidemic and to employ preventive

measures whenever a disease threatens to become epidemic. Social action has already extinguished a long list of epidemic diseases which in former times caused a dreadful mortality. The great epidemic diseases of the Middle Ages, which destroyed nations almost, have been exterminated. Cholera, typhus fever, small-pox, and dysentery have been so reduced that they now affect but small numbers of people. Even yellow fever has been reduced and can be practically stamped out by proper sanitary measures. A reduction, within the last few decades, in the number of deaths due to tuberculosis is one of the striking achievements of modern sanitary science. All of these diseases are contagious or infectious, and, perhaps for that reason more than for any other, the community has been spurred to lively and associated action. There is still, however, a formidable list of preventable diseases, such as scarlet fever, diphtheria, measles, whooping-cough, and summer diarrhœa, which cause widespread sickness. In addition to the crusade against these forms of sickness, the prevention of accidents in industry and of certain diseases resulting from dangerous trades and insanitary homes and work-places are fields of promise for the sanitarian and for community action. These latter forms of sickness are, however, not as a rule contagious or infectious, and therefore reform moves

slowly, held back as it is by the many obstructions set in its path by selfish landlords and manufacturers. Such greed is plainly responsible for high death rates and for much sickness and poverty.

Unnecessary disease and death are mainly active in bringing misery to the working classes and especially to those in poverty. The well-to-do classes are relatively free from preventable, disease-producing conditions of work and of living. It is questionable whether, in the long run, the well-to-do classes, who own the tenements, the mines, and the factories, are really adding to their profits by resisting sanitary improvements, and by refusing, whenever possible, to remedy conditions which undermine the health and increase the death rate of the working people. To put it upon this criminally low commercial basis, even that is questionable. An increase of population is profitable to the owners of tenements; they see this very clearly when they support, as some of them do, unrestricted immigration. A large immigration means an increasing demand for tenements; but so does a decreased death rate. And yet, for the sake of profits, they often support unrestricted immigration and oppose measures for decreasing the death rate. The cost of sickness, now a loss to both landlord and tenant, might go toward an increased rental for a more sanitary tenement. The financial burden of sickness

is considerable even among well-to-do people. The workmen, with their smaller purses, must bear far heavier burdens. But the loss to the world of productive laborers, and the financial loss by sickness, are after all as nothing compared to the crime of unnecessarily and unconcernedly adding to the number of widows and to the number of the fatherless.

The entire matter sums itself up very easily. In the first place, we put property before human life; we unconsciously estimate it more highly and foster it more tenderly; we do it as individuals and we do it collectively. The railroads consider the Block System of signals and automatic couplers unwarranted luxuries because profits are valued more than the lives of the workmen. "The sanitary improvements which this law forces on us will ruin us," the landlords and manufacturers say, when a law is proposed to remedy the insanitary conditions of home and workshop. They will not, of course. Such laws never have, although many of the most important sanitary measures of the last hundred years have been opposed on these grounds. But suppose they did? Must we then withdraw our sanitary measure and continue to sacrifice certain human beings in order that other human beings may make profits? A few years ago I urged that a certain tenement be destroyed because it was vile and insanitary and caused about eight unnecessary

deaths every year. An officer answered my complaint in these words: "To demolish this tenement would do a great injury to the widow woman who owns it. It is her only property." Now murder is murder — whether the killing is done by a tenement or carbolic acid, whether in hatred and revenge or in cold blood, for a certain price or for profits, for the benefit of a rich man's purse or for the last crust which a widow may ever hope to have. As I understand it, THOU SHALT NOT KILL admits of no exceptions. It applies to the man who makes profits by the killing as truly as it applies to the hold-up man.

This evil, as indeed most evils, is rooted in the old, old sins and in the old, old crimes. They are merely in new guises. Murder, Adultery, and Thievery have so disguised themselves that we do not recognize them. No one can help knowing that sickness is caused by vile tenements, by dangerous employments and insanitary workshops; every one must know also that much poverty and misery inevitably result from unnecessary sickness; furthermore, no one can fail to know that an excessive number of deaths occur among the work-people employed in certain industries and living in certain tenements. The cause and effect are clear. Then why does not the owner or employer remedy the cause of the sickness, poverty, and death? "He

probably does not know it exists," is the ordinary answer. But it is no answer. Attempt to remedy the evils by legislation, or by enforcement of the laws, and then you begin to realize that you are in a fight, and that, for one reason or another, the landlords and employers are against you. Every movement you make is watched and attacked. Even bribery will be used to defeat sanitary measures; that is to say, measures to save life. Now the conclusion one is forced to draw from an experience of that sort is not a pleasant one, but the logic by which one reaches the conclusion seems clear and certain. These men are murderers.

Mr. Jacob A. Riis says, "You can kill a man with a tenement as easily as you can kill a man with an axe." But in the one case there is no concern. The newspapers do not mention the murder and no one is indicted or sent to prison. In the other case the whole town is more than likely to be in a fever of excitement. By preventing legislation, or by using influence or bribes to prevent enforcement, a man may kill thousands of human beings and still be considered perfectly respectable; he may remain a member of the best uptown clubs, and free to go on repeating his crimes; but Heaven help the man who uses the axe! We are deceived by the use of new methods in killing. One is a social method for the sake of profits; the other the use of individual

physical force. It would seem as if we had arrived at the point where a social act may be understood. Almost every important act to-day is a social act and the most important crimes are social crimes. Ruskin has put the whole matter into powerful words: "A great nation, for instance, does not spend its entire national wits for a couple of months in weighing evidence of a single ruffian's having done a single murder; and for a couple of years, see its own children murder each other by their thousands or tens of thousands a day, considering only what the effect is likely to be on the price of cotton, and caring nowise to determine which side of battle is in the wrong. Neither does a great nation send its poor little boys to jail for stealing six walnuts and allow its bankrupts to steal their hundreds or thousands with a bow, and its bankers, rich with poor men's savings, to close their doors 'under circumstances over which they have no control' with a 'by your leave'; and large landed estates to be bought by men who have made their money by going with armed steamers up and down the China Seas, selling opium at the cannon's mouth, and altering, for the benefit of the foreign nation, the common highwayman's demand of 'your money *or* your life,' into that of 'your money *and* your life.' Neither does a great nation allow the lives of its innocent poor to be parched out of them by fog

fever, and rotted out of them by dunghill plague, for the sake of sixpence a life extra per week to its landlords; and then debate, with drivelling tears, and diabolical sympathies, whether it ought not piously to save, and nursingly cherish, the lives of its murderers."[1]

These are terrible words, and we are just awakening to their awful truth. We ourselves, and especially our penal laws, put most things on an individualistic basis, because our thoughts, our moral principles, and our laws have been moulded in an individualistic society which has largely passed away. Only an individual man killing an individual man, or an individual stealing from an individual, or an adulterer injuring an individual, is censured and punished. The injustice lies in the killing, the stealing, or the degradation of a human being, and not in the method by which it is done. The evils of gambling are not less evil because a "public service" corporation makes it possible, nor is killing less terrible because it happens in a Southern cotton-mill owned by Northern capital, or in a tenement owned, but perhaps never seen, by one of our wealthiest citizens. Public property obtained by grab-bills, or by bribery, is not less stolen property than the revenue of a pickpocket. A man who causes adultery by paying his working-girls starvation wages, which must be increased, if in no other way, by sin, is not less

injurious to the community than the procuress. I do not believe that the mass of the men who are responsible for these things know what they are doing. But most of our present-day social ills are due to these old sins and old crimes masquerading in unfamiliar guise.

This loss of life, so much of which is unnecessary, these heavy burdens which sickness lays upon the wage-earning classes in particular, and this bitter poverty of the widows and the fatherless, which follows so often upon sickness,—these are things which point to terrible social crimes and also fortunately to remedies which are immediately at hand and obvious.